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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000314

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/08/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [YM](#) [COUNTER](#) [TERRORISM](#)

SUBJECT: ROYG'S PUBLIC RESPONSE TO AL-QA'IDA JAILBREAK:  
WHERE IS IT?

REF: A. SANAA 272

[B](#). SANAA 286

[C](#). SANAA 296

[D](#). SANNA 50

Classified By: DCM NABEEL KHOURY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#). (S/NF) Summary. Yemeni security services continue to search for the 23 al-Qa'ida prisoners who escaped from a high-security prison in Sanaa on February 3 (ref A). Per Saleh's orders (ref B), the National Security Board is leading the nation-wide manhunt, while the Political Security Organization (PSO), from whose prison the al-Qa'ida operatives escaped, remains under investigation to ferret out those responsible for incompetence and/or aiding and abetting the jailbreak. Family members of the escapees are being held for questioning, but all 23 prisoners remain at-large.

[2](#). (S/NF) While the manhunt continues, there has been no visible increase in security measures on the streets of Sanaa, a tactic the ROYG typically employs during such a threat to assert government control and allay public concern. Government media outlets have largely remained quiet on the escape since the armed forces website "26 September" first broke the story, even refraining from any attempt to deflect criticism away from the government. Saleh told Ambassador and DCM that he did not want to alarm the public with too much publicity but that a reward system would be put in place if the escapees are not found soon (Comment: DCM will report septel on details of the conversation with Saleh. End Comment). End Summary.

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Where's the Security?  
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[3](#). (C) Despite a slightly increased security posture immediately following the February 3 break-out, neither civilian nor military security forces have been deployed en masse in Sanaa, although security at checkpoints leading out of the city has been increased. While the ROYG may believe the individuals have already fled to rural areas outside direct government control, increased security on the streets is normally used during high-profile security situations to give the appearance that the government is taking every step necessary to counter the threat. Contacts at the Ministry of Interior (MOI) have provided no information to post on any increased security posture or the possible deployment of the country's elite CT force, the Central Security Force - Counter Terrorism Unit (CSF-CTU). In January, the CSF-CTU played a crucial role in securing the release of five kidnapped Italians by successfully tracking and apprehending the kidnappers (ref D).

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Where's the Spin?  
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[4](#). (C) After being the first to report on the break-out, government media sources have remained relatively quiet (ref C). Most noticeably is the absence of any public relations campaign to deflect criticism away from the government. After the Italian kidnapping in January, official media launched an aggressive campaign, daily lauding the government's tough stance against kidnapping (promising the death penalty for those involved) and its efforts to apprehend the kidnappers. So far there has been only one article in the "26 September" weekly paper, correcting some media reports that said the jailbreak occurred at a military facility.

[5](#). (C) Many contacts continued to view the lack of obvious security measures and official media reaction as an indication that the escape somehow involved high-level government support. Conspiracy theories abound, including that Saleh himself authorized the "transfer" of the prisoners, and plans on extorting the USG for money in exchange for their return. While conspiracy theories range from the ridiculous (that American forces kidnapped the al-Qa'ida prisoners because Yemen outlaws extradition) to the plausible (complicity of security officials at some level), it's clear that many Yemenis are questioning both the government's ability to provide security and its role as a partner in the GWOT.

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Comment  
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6 (S/NF) The official media's reluctance to assign blame for the al-Qa'ida break-out or quickly offer up a sacrificial lamb reflects the sensitivity of the ongoing investigation. Saleh is still grappling with his loss of confidence in PSO Director Qamish, one of the President's most trusted confidants. While the break-out presents an opportunity for the upstart National Security Bureau (NSB) to assume the long-coveted role of Yemen's most powerful security agency, the downfall of the PSO and Qamish would be a blow to Saleh and CT efforts. It also exposes a weakness in Saleh's ruling style, which has served him relatively well during the last 27 years. Saleh has been very effective at neutralizing potential opposition through an opaque system of financial patronage and fostering competition between government agencies. His success at preventing the rise of strong leaders throughout the government, combined with the ROYG's centralized decision making process and lack of institutional capacity, however, mean that Saleh cannot easily replace someone like Qamish or permit the PSO to continue its CT efforts without a trusted leader.  
Krajeski